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When wages were clothes: dressing down Aboriginal workers in the Northern Territory

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Prior to the introduction of equal wages in the 1960s, it was not unusual for Aboriginal workers in the Northern Territory to be paid in kind; in basic food, clothing and tobacco. Some workers received a few shillings a week, but even this wage could be withheld. In keeping with the protectionist ethos, clothing was encouraged as a substitute for cash wages, but in practice employers rarely equated clothing with wages. This paper explores the perspectives of pastoralists, employers of domestic servants, and the Army, considering how clothing primarily catered for the employers' needs.

The policy of paying Aboriginal workers in kind rather than in cash is raised in most historical studies of Aboriginal labour, particularly those centred on the pastoral industry. Tim Rowse discusses the politics of rationing in Central Australia in *White Flour, White Power*, while Mary Anne Jebb writes on Aboriginal employment conditions on the Kimberley pastoral stations in *Blood Sweat and Welfare*.² In considering this policy, there tends to be an underlying assumption that clothes were regarded as a form of payment in kind. In this paper, I argue that employers in the Northern Territory rarely regarded clothes as substitute wages, despite the rhetoric. Clothes were provided either to satisfy the employers' cultural notions of an appropriate dress code for their employees, or to ensure that workers had practical clothing to facilitate work. Even when special items of clothing were given as a reward for good work, employers were often reluctant to see these items taken away by employees. In so far as employers sought to retain ownership or control over clothing, it cannot be said that this clothing was truly 'paid' to Aboriginal workers as a wage.

Why clothes instead of cash?

When the Commonwealth Government took over the administration of the Northern Territory in 1911, steps were taken to regulate the employment of Aboriginal workers. The *Aboriginals Ordinance 1911* outlined a system in which the Chief Protector of Aboriginals would have control over Aboriginal employment by means of a licences sold to employers.³ The majority of Aboriginal workers in the Northern Territory worked for pastoralists, employing Aboriginal stock workers, and private households, employing Aboriginal domestic servants. In the 1930s and 1940s the Army became another major employer of Aboriginal labour. All three groups adhered to the standard wage scale outlined in the 1928 Bleakley report. This report had been written by the Queensland Chief Protector of Aboriginals at the request of the Federal government. It was hailed as the first thorough investigation of Aboriginal employment conditions in the Northern Territory. In a system which discouraged the payment of cash wages, Bleakley focused on employment conditions such as accommodation, food and clothing. He confirmed the basic remuneration for Aboriginal workers as being a wage of five shillings per week, two of which were banked in a Trust Account, and a supply of food and clothing. He argued that where the 'supply of food and clothing is fairly fulfilled, the wage of 5s. per week may be regarded as reasonable remuneration'.⁴

The practice of paying minimal or no cash wages was not particular to employers of Aboriginal labour. In early colonial Western Australia the truck system similarly paid workers in goods.⁵ The use of this system for Aboriginal employees in the twentieth century was primarily due to pastoralists who were eager to ensure maximum profits, and were influential in shaping government policy. Pastoralists were careful to couch their objections to cash wages in the humanitarian language of the time. They argued that wages would have a detrimental and demoralising effect on Aboriginal workers. In 1932, the Northern Territory Pastoral Lessees' Association stated that:

A large proportion of the money given to aboriginals in the present stage of their development is apt to be spent on liquor and opium. Thus the money the pastoralists can ill-afford is used to degrade the remnants of the aboriginal race.⁶

They argued that the 'aboriginal race' was incapable of resisting the corrupting influence of European culture, employing Social Darwinist theory which claimed that extinction was inevitable if Aboriginal people were not protected.⁷ This stance was perfectly in keeping with the paternalist protection policy endorsed by the government.

At the 1929 Conference on Aboriginal labour, one pastoralist, H.E. Thonemann, an absentee landlord from Melbourne, conveyed his paternalistic concern for Aboriginal welfare. He stated:

We pastoralists say that the black should be properly clothed and fed, and given tobacco and luxuries, such as in certain cases he deserves ... The average black does not know the value of coin, and to give him coin is going to lower his status and not raise it.⁸

But Thonemann's definition of 'properly clothed and fed' was far more generous than the larger companies such as Vestey's, which scarcely paid lip service to the ethos of protectionism. According to the North Australia Workers' Union (NAWU) organiser, Owen Rowe, the food and conditions on the eastern stations of the Northern Territory, including Thonemann's station, were 'as high above Vestey's as the stars are above the earth'.⁹ In the west the three main companies were the Duracks and the British-owned Bovril Australian Estates and the Australian Investment Agency, known as Vestey's.

'Properly' clothed?

NAWU Secretary, Robert Toupein, was highly critical of working conditions for Aboriginal workers on pastoral stations. He wrote in the *Pan-Pacific Worker* in 1930:

On these great cattle stations, owned chiefly by absentee capitalists, the aborigines are worked by them as stockmen, drovers and general rouseabouts. They are paid no monetary wages, and are given the roughest and poorest of food, principally damper and beef ... and they are given the scantiest of clothing and a small amount of stick tobacco of the worst kind¹⁰.

The NAWU organiser, Owen Rowe suggested that the clothing was only supplied to Aboriginal workers was the absolute minimum:

The clothes supplied to blacks working under country licences are only sufficient to cover their nakedness, and in most instances is supplied from this viewpoint only. The boys on the cattle stations are given a pair of dungaree trousers and a shirt. The lubras are given a dress of the cheapest material, calico and a piece of nagra, nagra is the native name for turkey red twill, it is worn as a loin cloth with the dress over it, just sufficient to cover the nakedness. The empty flour bags are given to the lubras to make dresses.¹¹

Conditions in the township of Darwin were somewhat better, but still far from adequate. In 1911, there were 125 Aboriginal workers employed in Darwin, according to the report of J.T. Beckett, Inspector of Aborigines. Their work included gardening, chopping-wood, shopping, and housework such as sweeping, and washing and hanging out clothes. Beckett described the Aboriginal workers as:

a docile submissive people, who, in spite the many aspersions cast upon them by detractors in other States render excellent service in return for the pittance doled out to them.¹²

The clothing issued to domestic servants varied widely from house to house. Conigrave, one of Darwin's 'silvertails', commented on 1930s practice:

If during the week you have given your black boy your discarded sun helmet, or an old pair of shoes, trousers, singlets or some other garment, irrespective of whether they are several sizes too large for him, it is a foregone conclusion that he will appear in them at the picture show and 'swank' over other boys who have not been quite so generously treated by their employers.¹³

The practice of clothing Aboriginal servants in over-sized, cast-off clothing was not unusual. In an oral history interview, Con Scott, who was born in Darwin in 1921, recalled their Aboriginal servant was given his father's hand-me-down trousers which he pulled in at the waist with a piece of rope.¹⁴

In some cases employers did buy new clothes for Aboriginal servants, but as one employer recalls, they always bought these clothes from the Chinese store which specialised in cheap clothing specifically for this purpose.¹⁵ Rowe described the quality of clothing as being usually of the poorest material. Even so, Rowe, who had travelled throughout most of the Territory in his capacity as union organiser,

concluded that: 'Generally speaking, the blacks around the towns are well fed, clothed, and treated as compared with their brethren in the bush'.¹⁶

Clothing to suit the employer

There is ample evidence to suggest that where Aboriginal workers were given clothes it was merely to satisfy the needs of the employers. In the case of pastoralists, it is clear that they could not employ an Aboriginal stockworker without providing adequate protective clothing suitable for riding, such as boots and trousers. According to the Berndts the nature of stock work was such that any clothes wore out. The Berndts noted that 'an issue of trousers, shirt, and boots every two months was the minimum necessary for these Aborigines, who work put a heavy strain on their clothing'.¹⁷ Clothes in this context were not so much remuneration as they were a part of the necessary equipment to undertake work. Keith Willey's biography of Matt Savage, manager of Montejinnie Station, an outstation of Victoria River Downs, from 1924 to 1934 describes the process of giving out clothes as part of the necessary preparation for starting work:

[T]he black stockmen would be coming in from their annual walkabout, when they wandered over the country living in the manner of their ancestors. Back at the station we would throw each man a pair of boots, a shirt and trousers; and set them to shoe the horses and check ropes and hobbles.¹⁸

In the case of private employers of domestic servants, clothes served three main purposes. Clothes were initially given to cover nakedness and protect the European sense of modesty. An adequate supply of clothes and also laundry facilities were also necessary to ensure that servants presented themselves for work in state of cleanliness. Finally, some clothing, particularly items such as white aprons, were intended to transform Aboriginal workers into the employer's ideal notion of the domestic servant. Creating this image was essential for those employers who regarded servants as a means to ensure their social status.

The discourse of cleanliness or 'the fetish of domestic purity'¹⁹ was paramount for white women in Northern Territory households, both in the town and in the country. Hazel Mackey, whose husband was head of the Bureau of Meteorology from 1937, recalled in an interview that their Aboriginal servant had been a stockman 'out in the bush somewhere'. Typically, her first concern on meeting him was to solve the problem of dirt. She recalled:

But when he turned up – my goodness me was he a disreputable looking fellow – matted hair and dirty clothes. Oh dear! I looked at him and I said: 'What's your name?' And he said: 'Willie Dyall'. So I said to him: 'You're plenty dirty fellow'. and he said: 'No more missus, no more'. And I said: 'You're plenty dirty fellow'. So, I got him a bucket of water and a face washer, and I asked him if he would take himself down to the house and wash himself all over ... So anyhow he went and washed himself all over. He looked better, but his clothes were still filthy, so I got my husband to buy him some new clothes'.²⁰

In this context the purchase of clothes was serving her purpose, her need for cleanliness and not his. There was no sense that clothing was part of his remuneration for work.

But even in circumstances where Aboriginal people wanted to have clean clothes this luxury was only available to those who directly served the employers. In their survey of cattle stations, the Berndts noted that Aboriginal women struggled to keep their clothes clean with only small supplies of muddy water for washing. The exception was the women who were employed in the dining room. They were required to keep their frocks particularly clean and the clothes 'they wore while waiting on the table were washed or boiled and sometimes ironed in the station laundry'.²¹

Ellen Johnston was a station manager's wife who came to live on Alexandria Station in 1925. She took control of the homestead, creating her place as 'mistress' to her Aboriginal servants according to the expectations of Territory society. She painstakingly transformed the Aboriginal women in her service into maids, buying them uniforms and 'little white caps'. In doing so she sought to enhance her own prestige in pastoral society.²² Inara Walden in her study of NSW domestic workers similarly noted that where employers supplied 'full servant's attire' it was 'a matter of their own status'.²³

The novelist, Xavier Herbert, who lived in Darwin in the late 1920s, was scathing in his criticism of those white administrative staff in Darwin who liked to imagine themselves as British colonial masters.

His novel *Capricornia* follows the lives of the Shillingsworth brothers who came to Darwin to work as clerical staff. On the subject of servants he wrote:

Oscar took a smelly native from the Compound and converted him into a piece of bright furniture ... and called him the Punkah Wallah. This Wallah fellow also waited at table and did odd jobs; and his lubra worked as housemaid. The services of this pair cost the Shillingsworths five shillings a week in cash and scraps of food, and added inestimably to the value they now set upon themselves.²⁴

In depicting the employers' representation of the servant as a 'piece of bright furniture' Herbert amply demonstrates why Aboriginal labour retained overtones of slavery well into the twentieth century. As long as workers were viewed as possessions, any clothing was simply a means to enhance the value of the employer's possession.

Writing in 1914 whilst staying at the Administrator's house, Elsie Masson describes this particular understanding of the relationship between the employer and employee. In a fictional account based on her observation of Darwin life, she relates the story of an employer, here called the 'Missis' and an Aboriginal servant:

George suddenly seems to be becoming more brisk and diligent in his work. For a few days he is so good that the Missis decides he is really worth keeping, and, if worth keeping, deserving of more respectable clothing. So she buys him a pair of dungarees, a leather belt, two khaki shirts, and a red handkerchief. 'I give you these because you good boy', she explains graciously. 'Orright, Missis', he answers tersely. Next morning he presents himself in all his new grandeur and says, without any preliminaries, 'Missis, me go out bush to-morra'. 'What, George?' exclaims a startled Missis. 'Go back longa my country to-morra', he repeats. 'How you go?' asks the Missis weakly. 'Canoe'. There is nothing more to be said.²⁵

The new clothes were bought with the express intention of transforming George into a more 'respectable' servant. It was inconceivable that he should take these new clothes as his reward for services and leave.

Paid in kind – clothes to keep?

If clothes were given to workers in lieu of wages by way of reward for labour, then the clothes should have become the possession of the worker. By possession, I mean that the clothes should have been theirs to keep, to sell, to trade, to give to family or to others to satisfy customary exchange. But despite official policy, clothes were rarely given as wages, and it was common for clothes to remain the property of the employer.

On cattle stations, Aboriginal stockworkers were given clothes suitable for riding and working, but these were clothes on loan rather than clothes to keep. In 1932 Owen Rowe, commented that:

One big station firm indulged in the Christian practice of compelling the stockboys, after the mustering of the cattle was finished, which is just a seasonal work, to hand back the clothes, issued them to work in, and then sending them naked into the bush to fend for themselves ... The scarcity of clothing among these unfortunates compels them to wear the clothes until they are absolutely filthy or until they fall to pieces on them.²⁶

The *Aboriginals Ordinance, 1918-1943* stated that employers were to 'keep each aboriginal employed by him in food and clothing' but it was not clear that the clothing was to be kept.²⁷ Nevertheless, according to the 1928 Bleakley Report, the practice of having workers return their clothes to the store was not part of the contract. Bleakley argued that as 'these clothes are part of the working native's remuneration it seems like a breach of contract to make him return them as they are actually his own property'.²⁸ Despite this, the practice continued on most stations. During the 1947 conference on Aboriginal employment Mr Brodie, representing the Northern Territory Pastoral Lessees' Association, noted that no clothes were supplied to Aboriginal stockworkers during walkabout. This meant that clothes were given when there was work to be done, and no clothes were given when the workers went on holidays.²⁹

In rare cases employers did give out special clothes as a form of bonus for good work, as in the story of Matt Savage. In this instance Savage was apparently not concerned that the clothes in question would be given away:

You might give a blackfellow an extra-bright cowboy shirt and one of his mates would want it. At first the reply would be: 'Oh, I'm not used to it yet. Can't give-um yet'. But in a few days the shirt would change hands.³⁰

This particular shirt clearly had value to the worker and can be more properly viewed as a substitute for cash wages.

In Darwin, a similar ethos existed, but here it was more difficult to control the exchange of clothing, given that most workers were in daily contact with their kin and community. In 1911 the Inspector of Aborigines, J.T. Beckett wrote:

Owing to the strange, but in many ways estimable system of socialism existing among them, employers often have great difficulty in keeping their black boys clothed at all and frequently a boy who has been given a new shirt and trousers one day will arrive at his work next morning divested of either or both garments and ask for more, he having given his clothes to his 'uncle', his 'half-father', his brother or other relative who was in need of them.³¹

The most blatant case of employers' retaining clothes can be seen in the records of the Army stationed in Darwin in 1933. Aboriginal men employed by the Army were paid at the standard rate of five shillings per week of which two shillings were deducted and paid into the trust fund. Under the *Aboriginal Ordinance* it was assumed that food and clothing would make up the rest of the payment. The Army provided Aboriginal workers with food; documented as being a 'half-ration of meat, bread and vegetables ... supplemented on occasions by kitchen scraps'. They were also issued with clothes, in the form of a uniform consisting of six white singlets, 4 blue shirts, 3 khaki shorts and one hat, per annum. But while the Army was content to pay the minimum wage of five shillings, they refused to consider giving Aboriginal workers clothes to keep. The kit issued to Aboriginal workers was regarded as a sort of Army uniform and it remained the property of the Army.³²

To ensure that no clothes went missing, the Army insisted that each Aboriginal worker maintain a two-pound credit in their trust fund to cover any loss of clothing. This bond of two pounds was the equivalent of eight weeks wages. The Army Major argued that the clothing they provided was on a 'special scale differing from that provided in random fashion by the average employer in Darwin'. The officer noted, however, that it was 'a debatable point whether it is in accordance with the aboriginal regulations by which the clothing issued becomes the unrestricted property of the native'.³³

Assimilation policy – the emperor's new clothes

During the 1930s some Aboriginal workers spoke out against the protectionist system arguing that they should have access to cash wages and greater autonomy. Jack Sullivan, a so-called 'half-caste' stockworker, demanded cash wages in 1933. He recalled that young Reg Durack supported him, telling his pastoralist father: 'Dad, why don't you take notice of what Jack's tellin you? Man enough to handle his own business. Why you don't givim the money?'³⁴ Similarly, David Cahill, owner of Seven Emus station, in the north-east, believed that Aboriginal stockworkers should have access to cash. He wrote in defence of four drovers, jailed for cattle-killing in 1933, stating:

These boys left here on the 6th of November 1932, to try and get their wages. All they got was ten shillings each for which they had to walk 69 miles in and the same back ... They left here again on November 27th to try to get some more of their wages from the Protector ... I wonder how a salaried official like Dr Cook, drawing £10, or more, per week would like to walk a distance of 138 miles for the sake of collecting ten shillings he had earned five or six months previously. These boys had enough money held by the Protector to keep them until they were employed again, and now instead of getting their wages they are serving a term of imprisonment.³⁵

By the late 1930s, Aboriginal workers in Darwin were also demanding cash wages. In 1936, a representative of the Darwin Larrakia people protested in the *Northern Standard* newspaper that he was working and drawing three shillings a week. He asked: 'How can we buy clothes for ourselves and keep our families on 3/-?'³⁶ The value of three shillings at that time was little more than pocket money. One shilling would buy a ticket for the cinema, while a loaf of bread was eight pence.³⁷

But when the Commonwealth government finally responded to this lobby it was to introduce the assimilation policy and this policy was not what the protesters had had in mind. In 1938, Jack McEwen, Minister for the Interior, introduced the new policy which aimed:

[T]o raise the status of the aboriginal ... to such a degree as would justify the conferring of full citizenship rights upon these people by an appropriate authority, each person being considered as an individual. Such person would, of course, be entitled to all the privileges of white workers.³⁸

The assimilation policy was based on the curious assumption that the barrier to equal rights and citizenship for Aboriginal people was not the fundamental inequality of the law, but the inadequacy of the Aboriginal people themselves. It was assumed that an innate inferiority existed which might, with suitable training and guidance, be gradually overcome. The question of clothing and cash wages was an important part of the new policy.

In 1948 Aboriginal workers on pastoral stations in the Northern Territory were granted 'cash' wages. I use the term 'cash' hesitantly, because in reality a system of accounting was put in place whereby wages were recorded and clothing and other personal items were deducted, with the resulting credit being accrued in a trust fund. The report which instigated this system was written by V.G. Carrington, Acting Director of Native Affairs, who reported on 'the conditions of native employment', having visited the Barkly Tablelands and Victoria River districts in the Northern Territory in 1945. He found that most stations were not paying any wages, having been exempt on the grounds that they were maintaining relatives and dependants of workers. Station managers were simply providing food, clothing and tobacco.³⁹

Carrington was opposed to this practice on the grounds that it did nothing to further the government's policy of assimilation. He claimed that:

[T]he fact that they get clothing, tobacco and such things as razors and mirrors at regular intervals, provides no incentive to improve, or to care for possessions, both of which are important if natives are to advance in the social scale.⁴⁰

Carrington's recommendations were that Aboriginal workers be paid wages at a scale that would allow them to buy their own clothes:

Males:	under 16 years	15/- per week
	16-18 years	£1. per week
	18-21 years	£1.5.0 per week
	over 21 years	£2.5.0. per week
Drovers:	with cattle	£3 per week
	with plant only	£2 per week
Females:		10/- per week

In addition to these wages, employers were to provide accommodation, a laundry, firewood, and medical benefits. The male wage was intended to allow a married worker to support his wife and one child. Additional children would be supposed through the Child Endowment scheme, while old and infirm people on stations would become the responsibility of the Department of Native Affairs.⁴¹

Carrington indicated what he believed to be a reasonable issue of clothing and other necessities to workers per annum. His scale for male workers was 6 shirts, 6 trousers, 4 pairs of boots, 2 hats, 1 sweater, 1 overcoat, 2 blankets, 4 handkerchiefs, 4 towels, 1 mosquito net, 1 camp sheet, 2 razors, 2 mirrors, 4 combs and 4 pipes. These items were estimated to cost £22/9 per annum.⁴² Women workers were to be given 6 dresses, 6 yards of calico, 1 sweater, 4 towels, 4 handkerchiefs, 4 combs, 2 mirrors, 1 pair of scissors, 1 blanket, 1 swagcover, 1 mosquito net and needles and thread. Women who were not working would receive the same amount, but only four dresses instead of six. While the Carrington report was seen as a step forward, in reality there had merely been a simple exchange of clothing for wages. Whereas before, wages were withheld and clothing supplied, now wages were supplied and clothing withheld. While wages were only sufficient to buy basic clothes very little had been achieved. According to Mary Anne Jebb, the Carrington system, along with aspects of the New Guinea system were incorporated into Western Australian regulations in 1950 and applied to Kimberley cattle stations. Dave Pullen, then Welfare Officer in the Kimberleys, similarly noted that £1 would not cover the cost of clothing for a man and his family.⁴³

The idea of paying for clothes might have been a step forward if the Aboriginal workers had gained some autonomy in their ability to choose, purchase and if necessary dispose of their clothes. But in fact, this type of autonomy was precisely what Carrington intended to avoid. He suggested that a Patrol Officer be given the authority to see that issues of clothing were 'made only as required and that money was spent wisely'. Clothing was still issued at regular intervals through the station-run stores, no doubt offering the same quality of clothing as had previously been supplied. In addition, there was to be no opportunity for Aboriginal workers to give their clothes away. The Patrol Officer was to explain 'that if clothes were ill-treated or items lost, gambled or given away, they would have to go without other things to replace them'.⁴⁴

A second problem raised by the introduction of wages to pay for clothes was that the price of clothes remained in the control of the employer. The Patrol Officer was supposed to prevent station managers from charging exorbitant prices for clothes, but at least one previous case suggests that this policy was less than foolproof. Castle and Hagan discuss an incident which occurred in Queensland in the 1930s where the local Protector was allegedly making a profit from Aboriginal clothing purchases.⁴⁵

Once the Carrington Report was put into practice, and Aboriginal stock-workers were paid wages sufficient to buy clothes there is little evidence of any dramatic change in practice. In 1950, the station records for Victoria River Downs record the purchases of 'stockboys'. The typical male worker was paid £1 per week plus food and tobacco and was required to purchase his own clothes, other small necessary items, and dresses for his wife. The price of these goods accounted for a substantial portion of wages. Perhaps most significant was that the workers only purchased goods when they were actively working, with a complete set of clothing being purchased each October at the beginning of the working season. None of the workers bought clothes up the amounts suggested by the Carrington Report. During an average of six months per annum no purchases were made and the accounts indicate that during these months the workers were on holidays. Thus it appears that the original practice of not providing clothes for 'walkabout' had continued into the assimilation era.

Conclusion

It is a well known historical fact that Aboriginal workers in the Northern Territory were expected to work for little more than food, clothes and tobacco. In this paper I have suggested that we should hesitate before including clothing in that list. There were very few employers who believed that Aboriginal workers were entitled to clothing on a permanent basis. Most regarded clothing merely as a means to ensure that their workers were able to complete their work in a satisfactory manner. Wages may have been sacrificed in favour of clothes, but clothes were not regarded as wages.

Endnotes

1. I would like to acknowledge the helpful advice of the anonymous referees.
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15. Transcript of interview with Bernadette Wing, 1990, NTRS226, TS611, Tape 1, p. 13, NTAS.
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23. Inara Walden, "'That was slavery days': Aboriginal Domestic Servants in New South Wales in the Twentieth Century", in Ann McGrath & Kay Saunders with Jackie Huggins (eds), *Aboriginal Workers, Special Issue of Labour History*, no. 69, 1995, p. 198.
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27. Cited in Berndt & Berndt, *End of an Era*, p. 13.
28. Bleakley Report.
29. Brodie, p. 13, 42/14, Bovril deposit, VRD papers, NBAC, ANU.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 100.
31. Beckett, to Basedow, July 29 1911.
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45. Robert Castle and Jim Hagan, 'Regulation of Aboriginal Labour in Queensland: Protectors, Agreements and Trust Accounts 1897-1965', *Labour History*, no. 72, 1997, pp. 69-70.